

Students, Schakowsky Share Ideas on Child Labor

**By Kathy Routliffe**

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Lincolnwood kids may grumble about teachers, tough homework assignments and the sorrow of days spent in the classroom. But Linda Keegstra's fifth-grade class at Rutledge Hall know children elsewhere in the world would give anything they had to live through those problems.

They read about the plight of child workers around the world, particularly children of migrant workers across the United States. When they learned how the children work hard and often dangerous hours in farm fields and elsewhere, how they rarely get the chance to stay in school, they became incensed. What could they do about it, Keegstra said her students asked.

Their outrage and questions eventually led U.S. Rep. Jan Schakowsky, D-9th, to their classroom, and into a lively June 2 question-and-answer session about the situation, Keegstra said Monday.

Students first learned about child labor during social studies classes earlier this year, but they didn't become truly upset about the issue until late March or early April when they read further about it in a news article.

"There's a little magazine called Time For Kids, and the article was about migrant labor and kids," Keegstra remembered.

Her fifth-graders were incredulous, the veteran teacher said. Many of them had just turned 11, and were outraged that children their age could be denied an education and forced into hard physical labor.

"They were saying 'How can they do this?' They went to the Internet and did more research and became so upset," Keegstra said.

Rachel Prale was one of Keegstra's students.

"I was really shocked about how much (migrant workers' children) had to work, and all the problems they face, like having no education, or good food," she said.

The magazine article suggested that children could write local political representatives about the issue, and her students asked Keegstra for advice. And Keegstra told them they could write to Schakowsky's office, since her 9th District includes Lincolnwood.

The boys and girls were young, but already exhibited some rather adult skepticism about the result of any letter-writing campaign. They asked Keegstra if they'd get any answer from Schakowsky, and then if any answer they got might not simply be a form letter. She told them she believed they'd get some type of answer, but acknowledged it might not be a personal response.

Armed with that, the students composed their missives -- some of them, initially at least, very caustic. Keegstra said she had to remind her truly indignant charges that Schakowsky was not responsible for the state of child labor: "After that, they toned down what they were saying."

Not that the youngsters lost any of their fervor for justice, as they see it, for their migrant compatriots. Prale was blunt this week when she said, "I think that Iraqi war money going to all those bombs and machine guns, that could go to the children that are working in the fields."

Others took a more gentle tack. One girl told Schakowsky in her letter that knowing children her age couldn't get a good education because they had to work to help their families survive 'hurt her heart,' Keegstra said. The girl went on to say she wanted to do something even though she was just a little girl herself.

Several weeks passed. Then two weeks ago Keegstra answered her phone to find a Schakowsky aide asking if the representative could drop by her class for a visit.

Days before Schakowsky came to their class, Keegstra and the students reviewed the issues and compiled questions they wanted to present her. And, to their surprise, they also received written responses -- none of them form letters -- from Schakowsky. Even so, when Schakowsky entered the room June 2, many of her usually loquacious pupils were silent.

"We went over what we wanted to talk about; health issues, working conditions, the fact that kids wouldn't get very far if they couldn't stay in school and get an education," Keegstra said. "And they are not shy. But in the beginning they were awed because here was a big politician talking to them."

Prale said she hadn't expected a visit, adding "It was kind of cool to meet a real representative."

Schakowsky visited with the students for about 25 minutes, speaking first and then asking for questions. Keegstra said her students were impressed when the 9th District Democrat took notes, admitted that she didn't know the answers to some questions, and would try to find them out.

"I think one of our best questions was, 'How are you going to take action?'," Prale remembered. She said she was going to talk to people and I think she really meant it."

Schakowsky asked the class how they might solve child labor and education problems, and

they first suggested increasing the minimum wage. Then they told her about a canceled federal program which paid migrant worker parents to help keep their children in school.

"She was impressed that they knew something that she didn't know about," Keegstra said. Schakowsky also promised to keep class members up to date on any migrant-related legislative issues in Washington.

Her students might have been jaundiced about the political process before this experience, "but when (Schakowsky) responded, when she came and talked to them, they were really blown away. I think it let them know that people in the system can listen," Keegstra said.